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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3443b5gx>

Journal

Mormon Studies Review, 3

ISSN

2156-8022

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Publication Date

2016

DOI

10.18809/msr.2016.0107

Peer reviewed

Joseph Smith's First Vision: New Methods for the Analysis of Experience-Related Texts

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SH: Looking back in 1832, Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, recounted that his first audible prayer, uttered over a decade earlier in the woods near his parents' home in western New York State, resulted in a vision of one or two heavenly beings. Latter-day Saints, who canonized his 1839 account of this event in 1880, refer to the event as the first vision and regard it as the founding story of Mormonism.

Smith remembered this event often, narrated it more frequently than once thought, and recorded versions of it at least four times. The historical record also includes several secondary accounts written by contemporaries who heard Smith relate the event. The primary and secondary evidence, paradoxically, is both little known and much-contested, in large part because both insiders and outsiders to the tradition tend to read the event through the lens of the canonized 1839 version.

AT: [SLIDE #2] Our presentation today is going to take the form of a dialogue. We will begin by introducing some terms and our sources, then launch into two discussions, the first, a discussion of our assumptions and the way we view Smith's framing of his accounts, and the second, structured around a chart that analyzes the different versions in relation to each other.

[SLIDE #3] The method allows us to consider each of the versions in relation to whatever Smith experienced as a youth (the past), their historical context (their historical present), and each other (the relationship between the accounts). We think that this more disciplined method allows historians who stand inside and outside the tradition to identify points of agreement and difference more clearly and provides historians and sociologists with additional tools for analyzing the emergence of new social movements.

Terminology and Sources

SH: [HANDOUT #1: SOURCES]: We will analyze five of the first vision experience accounts, including three primary accounts from Joseph Smith and two secondary accounts from people who heard him tell about his experience in the 1830s. We know there are other accounts. We limited our analysis to those that occurred in the 1830s.

AT: [SLIDE #4] To help orient you both to the sources and to different kinds of analysis we will be doing, we will begin by introducing some terminology that we use throughout the talk.¹

- 1) We are treating an experience as a kind of “event” and we will be assuming that each time an experience is recounted we have a new event. Each account of the FV is, thus, an **Experience Event**. If you look at your handout, you can see that we are going to be working with five Experience Events.
- 2) Each experience event has a new event context and a new reason for recounting the event. The context may involve an oral recounting or a textual recounting. In either case, the account of the event is embedded in a larger frame. Drawing on sociological research on the role of framing in the emergence of social movements, we refer to this as a **ReFraming Event**.² Although a ReFraming Event may be a simple recounting of the Experience Event in another time and/or place, it often involves linking a series of events into a larger narrative, e.g., a story, an autobiography, or an origin account. All the accounts of the FV that we have frame it as one event in a series. The frame situates the FV event in a narrative and implicitly or explicitly offers a reason for recounting it. Of the five accounts, three are records of Smith orally recounting the event either to Latter-day Saints (1833a, 1835c) or to a visiting prophet (1835js) and two were recounted in histories of the new church (1832js, 1839js).
- 3) Sometimes a group appropriates an event – often a ReFramed event – as constitutive of its identity as a group. We refer to this as an **Identity Event**. The canonization of the 1839 version of the FV was an identity event.³
- 4) Finally, we can analyze Experience Event narratives by breaking them down into **Sub-Events**, which then allows us to make more refined comparisons.

SH: Our initial plan was to focus primarily at the Event and Sub-Event level, but as we got into our dialogue, we realized that to understand each other’s point of view we needed to start by discussing the assumptions we were bringing to our analysis, which then turned into a discussion of how the Experience Events were framed. So we will begin with a discussion of our assumptions and our analysis and interpretation of the framing of the sources, then turn to what we can learn from comparing the Sub-Events that make up the Event narratives. In both sections, we will go back and forth, discussing aloud both our analysis of the sources and our interpretation of what we see, highlighting points of agreement and disagreement. Finally we sum up what we have learned and leave time for Professors Flake and Benavides to respond.

Discussion #1: Assumptions and Framing

AT [SLIDE #5] How did JS frame his experience?

SH: When Joseph Smith told his story, his first vision was prologue to everything else, the seminal event of his prophetic career, the first revelatory event that framed all subsequent ones. [CLICK] He always led with it, whether in his 1832 or 1839 autobiographies or his 1835 story about the circumstances that produced the Book of Mormon. His story began there.

AT: I agree the first vision is the first significant event in his recounting of events leading to the formation of the church. [CLICK] But I don't think that you can say he presents the first vision in 1832 as "the seminal event of his prophetic career," since this account does not depict him as a prophet.

SH: To what extent can the framing of the event provide evidence for the accuracy or "originality" of memories? [SLIDE #6]

AT: In looking at these sources, I have been assuming from the outset that the 1832 version (and the 1830 allusion) are as close to the original experience as we can get, assuming there was an original experience. This is the interpretation advanced by Dan Vogel and shared by Richard Bushman.⁴ Bushman's views of Smith's memory are more nuanced than Vogel's but they share the view that of all Smith's first vision accounts, the 1832 document most accurately describes what he experienced as a teen. I am not assuming that there was an original experience, but will argue (further on) that there most likely was one and that its basic shape is reflected in the elements (the sub-events) that remain stable between accounts. My analysis, however, does not depend on that being the case. [CLICK]

SH: I began with a different set of assumptions based, in part, on memory studies. Unlike Fawn Brodie, who viewed the first vision as the "elaboration of some half-remembered dream," but like Vogel and Bushman, I assume that Joseph Smith had an experience in the woods of Western New York about 1820 that he understood as a vision of God.⁵

But I go my own way in asserting that there is no way to prove, nor reason to assume, that Smith's memories decrease in accuracy or increase in distortion in proportion to their historical distance from the experience itself. [CLICK]

Joseph Smith's narrative accounts of his first vision represent a convoluted mix of ways in which he consciously experienced the vision as it occurred and also as he re-experienced and interpreted it over time. So a close reading of the historical record can reveal insights into Smith's subjective experience of the original event as well as his ongoing experiences of it as manifest in subsequent memories (experience events), revealing some of the ways he integrated his past and ever-changing present in a continuous effort to make sense of both (framing events).⁶

Rather than assuming that any of Smith's accounts describes his original experience better than any other, I posit a pair of premises, one of which belongs to you. First, "variability does not have to be viewed as revealing mere methodological problems of how to establish the facticity of any person's account. It can become a resource for revealing the relationship between what people remember and the ideological dilemmas of their past and present."⁷ And, as you wrote in *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, analyzing "the composition of multiple narratives of an experience from different points of view is an excellent way to examine how interpretations of an experience develop over time."⁸

I don't think any amount of close reading can verify that one of Smith's accounts is more authentic or accurate than the others. There is no conclusive evidence either generally or in this case that earlier experience accounts are more accurate than later accounts. Memory studies show that, generally speaking, autobiographical memories like these are not accurate *or* distorted. They are both.⁹ They are not objective *or* subjective. They are both.¹⁰ Historians hope and assume that earlier accounts are more accurate. What is our evidence? Memory studies make the notion of accuracy tenuous. What does one mean by accurate and how can it be proved rather than simply assumed?

I don't mean to imply that there is no history in memory. Most memories are based on past experience, but such experience leaves traces or fragments in the brain that lie dormant *until something in the present causes the creation of a memory*. A memory is a combination of past remnants and present cues or reasons for re-remembering. Remembering is *piecing together a past that makes sense in the present*.

AT: Your response has made me aware that my assumption was an assumption. I think that your argument about memory is very interesting. I want to highlight two phrases – "something in the present causes the creation of a memory" and "remembering involves piecing together a past that makes sense in the present." I think that both these things can be true and still leave grounds for arguing that some versions describe an original experience better than others. To get at that, we have to consider what specifically might have triggered the creation of a memory in the present. [SLIDE #7- CUES]

SH: I agree that some memories may describe an experience better than others, just not with taking for granted that earlier memories necessarily do so. There are plenty of potential cues for Smith's 1832 history, which was almost certainly composed sometime between July and November. In June he wrote from Indiana to his wife in Ohio that he had been reflecting emotionally on his past. [CLICK] In July his main associate, Sidney Rigdon, claimed that God had taken authority from Smith and given it to him. [CLICK] In November Smith received a revelation that commanded him to keep a careful history and elaborated a theology for doing so. The text of that revelation is written on the pages that immediately follow his 1832 history. [CLICK]

AT: I think the introduction to the 1832 text supports this. There JS explicitly sets out to write "a history" of his life and "an account of his marvelous experience and of all the mighty acts which he doeth in the name of Jesus Christ ... and also an account of the rise of the church of Christ," which is followed by a list of things the Lord did to establish the church. This list begins with "the testimony from on high," which presumably refers to the first vision, but the emphasis in the list – which seems to function as an outline for the projected history – is on issues of authority in relation to the new church.

SH: I think he often if not always told the vision as a claim to authority, but to me there is still a problem with the 1832 account. Memory studies suggest that his 1832 thought should, under normal circumstances, cue and shape his memory, but there is dissonance between the simple soteriology of Smith's 1832 autobiography and his 1832 soteriology. [CLICK] A landmark revelation Smith received just a few months before composing his 1832 history envisions a pre-mortal world and a post-mortal hierarchy of heavens inhabited by mortals saved in several possible degrees of glory. Then shortly after he composed the 1832 autobiography he claimed revelations that require a ritual endowment of divine power administered by a set of priesthoods. This is the stuff Brooks Hollifield had in mind when he credited Smith with revealing "realms of doctrine unimagined in traditional Christian theology."¹¹ Why would 1832 memories be so far from 1832 revelations? Why wouldn't Smith account for the first vision in 1832 in ways that are consistent with what he just heard from heaven?

AT: I have a several responses. First, with respect to more expansive theological views, as the JSP notes indicate Christ's speech in the in 1832 account is actually "saturated with allusions and phraseology from both the Bible and JS's revelatory texts."¹² In addition, when JS summarizes what he had learned from the scriptures ("that God was the same yesterday to day and forever ... who created them"), its expansive tone reminds me of the "revelation to Moses" (June 1830). So there is clearly some cross-fertilization between his memories of the original event and his revelatory texts. [CLICK]

Second, I don't think you can interpret the FV accounts apart from the texts in which they are embedded, that is, in relation to what is relevant to the task at hand. If you consider the 1832 text as a whole, I think it is much more congruent with his 1832 soteriology than you suggest. If we return to the list of things he says he will cover in his 1832 account of the rise of the church, we can perhaps read a prophetic calling back into the vaguely worded "testimony from on high," but the explicit emphasis is on priesthood authority and the keys of the kingdom (apostolic authority) and not (at that point) prophetic authority, which is never explicitly mentioned. The Lord, as you point out, provides further revelation on priesthood authority in D&C 84 and 88, which are dated immediately after this.

Third, in the letter he wrote to his wife shortly before he started writing his history, which you mention, he said that he had been visiting a secluded "grove" outside town where he was "calling to mind all the past moments of his life" and in doing so "giving vent to feelings of his heart." These feelings have to do with sorrow over having given "the adversary" too much power over him, but he indicates that God "has forgiven [his] Sins." Praying for the forgiveness of his sins in a secluded grove is entirely in keeping with his 1832 account and suggests that the review of his life perhaps in preparation for writing his history cued his memories of that earlier experience.

So, to sum up, I will be arguing that the 1832 version is closer to what he likely experienced in his teens, that the memory of the event was evoked in the context of reviewing his life in preparation for writing his history, and that he placed it at the start of his history of the church because it highlighted the problem – the apostasy of all the extant churches – that his new church solved and only later recast his experience to reflect his sense of having been called as a prophet.

SH: I find that argument plausible. But there are still cases to be made for Smith's dissatisfaction with his 1832 history and the fact that its simple saved or damned soteriology is inconsistent with his February 1832 vision of tiered heavens that blurs lines between the salvations of the just and unjust. He evidently didn't finish or share this account. I don't think he felt like it did what he set out to do--accurately capture what he called his marvelous experience, including an adequate sense of his authority.

Discussion #2: Events and Sub-Events

AT: Let's turn to our method for analyzing the texts themselves. [SLIDE #8] It is designed to provide a disciplined descriptive analysis of sub-events (what happened) within an event narrative and explanations (why it happened) from the point of view of

the historical subject(s). This descriptive analysis can then provide a basis for explanatory accounts of what happened and why (meta-explanation) from the point of view of the historian. The method of analysis is a simplified version of the method developed by social cognitive psychologist Bertram Malle (2004) to analyze the everyday explanations that people offer for behavior in the context of social interactions. Taves 2009 (pp. 100-111) demonstrated how a simplified version of Malle's method could be used to analyze individual historical accounts of events. We are extending this method to demonstrate how it can be used to compare multiple accounts of an event.

[HANDOUT #2] If you turn to the second part of the handout, you can see that the chart includes key passages from all five of the narratives of the FV. The entire chart represents the "Experience Event." It is broken down into Sub-Events based on Malle's distinctions between unintended and intended events, here translated into the more user friendly language of "what happened" and "what he did," followed by Smith's cause or reason explanations, i.e., his embedded appraisals, where present. The chart thus allows us to analyze the elements that were included in each account, as well as changes in the description of what happened (what was experienced) and in the embedded explanations (or appraisals) of what was experienced between accounts. You should be aware that in focusing on the sub-events (what happened and what he did), we are clipping out phrases from the texts that speak to the questions of "what happened" and "what he did," so large chunks of straight discursive material are not well represented in the chart.

What stands out when we compare the content of the accounts in the chart? Why?
[SLIDE #9]

SH: The chart reveals variation but especially continuity in the accounts [CLICK] — Joseph Smith's distress and anxiety about religion aggravated by competitive pluralism, his turning to the Bible leading to prayer in the woods resulting in a theophany that relieved his distress. The evidence in the chart makes me confident that about 1820 Joseph Smith was an evangelical seeker whose experience in the woods, as he reported it, offended at least one Methodist minister for reasons I'll speculate about later.

AT: I agree with your list of items that appear in each of the accounts. It is this stable core makes me think that there likely was an original experience that took this basic shape. Although I have to say his experience sure does sound a lot like the one described to Emma just a few months earlier. But I am not so confident that his account "offended at least one Methodist minister," since the 1832 account simply says: "I could find none that would believe the heavenly vision" and the 1835 account doesn't mention this at all. Granted, he said, he "pondered these things in his heart," but I will argue that what he

couldn't get anyone to believe was that all the churches had apostatized and that this was what he continued to ponder in his heart. [CLICK]

SH: So it sounds like we agree on a basic experience and are starting to wrestle with the differences in the accounts of it and the weight we should give to them.

Exegesis

AT: Yes, I think that's right. [SLIDE #10] So let me introduce a difference that stands out for me: the shift in how he relates to the bible and how he learned all the churches are wrong. [TURN TO CHART – NOTICE YELLOW AND GREEN SHADED AREAS] In the first (yellow) he learns that all the churches are wrong through his exegesis, in 1835 and 1839 (green), he asks the Lord and he tells him. Moreover, in the later version he explains that he asked the Lord directly because, as of 1839, he is aware that exegesis isn't a reliable method, stating explicitly: "the teachers of religion ... understood ... Scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible"! [CLICK]

I think that he likely concluded in his early teens that all the churches were wrong based on his exegesis of scripture. I think this likely took place in a revival context in which his sense of his own sinfulness was awakened and he was expected to seek forgiveness within one of the extant "sects" and thus had to choose between them. In light of concluding they were all wrong, he appealed directly to the Lord for forgiveness.

I think that he started using the "ask and receive" method of praying (James 1) later, most likely in conjunction with his early revelations (1827-28). In time, I think he also became more aware of the many different conclusions that could be drawn from the exegesis of scripture. Finally, in his later accounts of the first vision, he wants to heighten the sense of his prophetic authority. The shift from exegesis to the "ask and receive" method speaks to all these issues. [CLICK] By *substituting* the "ask and receive" prayer method, he is no longer figuring out all the churches are wrong himself. He inquires and the Lord (or a personage) tells him. Moreover, in telling him, the personages/Lord gave him a privileged status as the one to whom this information has been revealed, which in turn ups his status, if not yet to full-fledged prophet in the text per se, to something that can easily be read as a prophetic calling.

SH: Your insight is compelling--that in 1832 Smith remembered praying for forgiveness in light of his own scriptural exegesis that all the churches were wrong and later remembered that his inability to discern for himself was resolved by a revelation that all churches were wrong.

But I'm not yet convinced that there was a fundamental shift in Smith's epistemology between 1820 and 1832, or between 1832 and 1839. No doubt he had developed the ask and receive method by 1831, but evidence that he was using it by then is not evidence that he wasn't using it before. His early revelation texts are not evidence of a shift in his thinking, only the beginning of documentation of his thinking. The 1832 account can be read to support that he always followed the method spelled out in his early revelation texts, which is a combination of scriptural work followed by revelation—he searches the scriptures, he thinks about it, he prays to God. It is plausible to see a consistent epistemology in Smith's early revelation texts and in his first vision accounts.

AT: I think that what the chart shows is that the difference is not mere nuance. *He took out the part about searching the scriptures and replaced it* with the “ask and you will be told” method. He didn't combine them. This is a crucial point, I think, because it undercuts a conflation strategy. It's hard to argue that he is using both methods at the same time when he replaces one with the other.

SH: Almost thou persuadest me. As we continue I'll develop a rationale for clinging to my “almost.”

Theology

AT: There is another interesting difference I see between the accounts. [SLIDE #11] If you turn back to the chart and look at the second grayed in section, you will see that there are passages in Smith's 1835 and 1839 accounts and in the Curtis account that refer to Smith struggling with some sort of negative power or presence. [CLICK] There is no mention of struggle in the 1832 account, but it is a prominent part of JS's vision of Moses's vision (and Moses's calling as a prophet).¹³ There are, in other words, interesting parallels between Smith's accounts of the visions of Moses, who “saw God face to face & ... talked with him,” and JS's 1835 and 1839 accounts of his first vision (e.g., losing his strength, being tempted by Satan, and then explicitly called by God).¹⁴ This suggests to me that in his 1835 & 1839 accounts JS conflates what he remembers of his experience with his visions of Moses's experience. I think that the surviving accounts suggest that this was a gradual process that occurred as he recounted his story in various contexts (i.e., giving talks and to Matthias). Conflating the two experiences makes his experience more like that of a prophet and less like that of an evangelical.

SH: I think there may be a connection; I'm not ready to call it conflation, between Smith's experience and his vision of Moses. Smith mentioned several times that his tongue was tied as he attempted to pray, that he was opposed by some power. These accounts are similar to the Moses vision and yet distinctive, suggesting a motif that Smith followed with his own memories.

AT: Maybe conflation isn't the right word. I agree there are differences. I just think it is significant that shortly after the founding of the church in 1830, he received a revelation that elaborates on Moses's direct encounter with God and that some similar features wind up in his later recollections of his first vision. Moses is the first of the prophets. This suggests to me that he is starting to think more -- or you could say the Lord is trying to get him to think more! -- about how prophets are called and his memories of his first vision gradually come to sound more like Moses's.

SH: That's an interesting idea, but if he's starting to think about prophetic callings in 1830, why don't we see it in 1832? Your point feeds right into my sense that he is suppressing things in his 1832 account, indeed seems to have suppressed the whole 1832 account. [CLICK]

Overall, I think that the theology of the 1832 account is strangely dated. It's Book of Mormon theology, not reflective of Smith's later revelations. It's at least 2 years old if not 10, and in those 2 years Smith moved far away from Evangelical Christianity toward a radically tiered soteriology mediated by priesthoods and rituals (or ordinances, as his revelation texts call them). The Christ speech in 1832 account may, as you say, resonate with the Moses revelations, but as you just pointed out, his later accounts resonate with it more. Moreover, the 1832 account doesn't resonate with revelations received about the same time as its composition. His 1832 history is strangely foreign to his thought at the time of its composition in summer-fall 1832.

AT: I don't think that the 1832 document as a whole or the FV portion in particular is "strangely foreign" to JS's thought at the time of composition. I think the history he planned to write in 1832 reflected a soteriology mediated by priesthoods and rituals/ordinances, but that he never got to them in this version of the history. [CLICK] He didn't develop priesthood or ordinances in the context of his FV experience b/c they were revealed later, but he began the document with a list of what he called his marvelous experiences, the first of which was his FV, the third "reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministering of Angels," and the fourth "power and ordinance from on high to preach the Gospel."¹⁵

Moreover, we agree that some contemporary content is included in his first vision account, well documented by the notes in the Joseph Smith papers and seen in the resonances with the vision of Moses. I think of this as a sort of unconscious "seepage" between what the Lord has revealed to him in revelations and what he recalls Christ saying to him in his first vision. In the early thirties, in response to Rigdon's challenge and direct revelations from the Lord, he was grounding his authority primarily in priesthood and ordinances. His vision of Moses was a prelude to his re-"translation" of

the Bible, starting with the Book of Genesis. So, while he is receiving these ideas about prophets in this period, I would argue that they were not "cued" in relation to his history or his FV until he started to think of his authority in explicitly prophetic terms. So I don't think Smith was suppressing anything in his 1832 account; I think he just didn't finish the history he started so he didn't publicize it. The fact that he started recounting the FV orally soon after composing the 1832 document is further evidence against suppression.

SH: Or evidence that he didn't like the way he told it in his 1832 history, so suppressed it and started to tell it differently in response. [CLICK] Why didn't he finish it? He claimed revelations that gave a theology for keeping his history. He started it but then didn't finish it, and there's no evidence that he shared it with Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer, who were relying on him to provide source material for the period only he knew. I think he must not have liked it for some reason. [AT Cue Steve to explain]

Rejection

SH: [SLIDE #12] Let me draw your attention to what I regard as the most emotional passage in any of Smith's accounts, the section of the 1839 account in which Smith tells of reporting his experience to a Methodist minister, being rejected, and then reflects passionately. Notice how he first remembers facts—a few days after the experience he meets the minister, reports the experience, and the minister rejects it because visions and revelations ceased with the apostles. Then notice how remembering that set of facts in 1839 launches him into a frustrated rant about a lifetime of persecution. This section is not specific. It's not about events or experiences as much as it is about feeling persecuted from infancy. The first part is factual memory. There probably was an objective meeting between Joseph Smith and a Methodist minister. The second part is interpretive memory, Smith's subjective experience of what that meeting meant in 1839, cued by lots of frustrating experience in the meantime, including the Missouri governor's order that Mormons must leave the state, and Smith's having just come from a winter jailed in a cold, stinking, underground jail cell in Liberty, Missouri where he awaited trial on a charge of treason for preaching that his Church would fulfill the Book of Daniel's prophecy about a kingdom that would subdue all others. It's this passage that makes me think that Smith's accounts can best be understood as differing ways he responded to rejection. [CLICK]

Looking through that lens leads me to believe that in 1832 he told his story to seek acceptance and validation, downplaying offensive theological content in his experience as much as possible. [CLICK] This explains the dissonance between the 1832 account and the 1832 theology. It also explains why the 1832 history doesn't echo the 1830 Moses revelation as much as later accounts do, since in 1832 Smith wasn't trying to remember himself as a prophet, just as another convert seeking acceptance, but he

couldn't do it in the face of actually being, in his own mind and the minds of his followers, a full-fledged prophet/revelator. That explains why he neither finished or shared his 1832 history and why he started over later, pointing us to the 1839 account as an alternative. [CLICK]

Literary scholars Neal Lambert and Richard Cracroft (1980) theorized an explanation that could account for the conflict I see. Granted, it is frustratingly unknowable, but the idea is that JS's original report to the minister was more like his 1838 account than his 1832, and therefore objectionable.¹⁶

AT: I agree that we need to account for this passage, but I don't think your explanation is the most plausible. I think it is much more likely that his "diatribe," as you call it, is a response to evangelical clergy's vehement rejection of his claims *in the thirties*, which is when they become widely known. [CLICK] I don't think the Cracroft and Lambert theory holds either. Their argument is based on their claim that the 1832 account is a typical evangelical conversion account. But they don't even discuss JS's 1832 exegetical claim that all the churches are wrong, which wasn't typical of evangelical conversion accounts and, in my view, provides a highly plausible (and sufficient) reason for why he could find no one who believed him.

SH: That's certainly plausible. My psychological interpretation does not depend on whether Cracroft and Lambert are right. I cite their essay because they offered an option that is consistent with my interpretation, an explanation for why Smith was rejected.

Our readings are clearly influenced by what we think about the nature of Smith's memories. I think the 1839 diatribe contains a fascinating mix of factual and interpretive memory, and as such it tells us a great deal about what he objectively experienced shortly after the experience in the woods and subjectively experienced at the time and over time as he internalized, interpreted, and reacted to that rejection. I think we have to take the psychology of this memory seriously. That specific rejection was painful for Joseph Smith, and his memories of his experience deal with that pain in one way or another.

AT: I think this is at most a frustrated rant about a decade -- not a lifetime -- of persecution. In fact, I would turn this whole issue around and argue that the ramping up of the rejection theme is something that stands out when we compare the versions. In the 1832 version all that he says is "that none would believe the heavenly vision." I suspect that what people had trouble with was his claim that all the churches were wrong not his claim to have experienced forgiveness. In the 1839 version, he says the minister said "there was no such thing as visions *or revelations* in these days, that all such things had ceased with the apostles." The insertion of "or revelations" here strikes me as highly

significant. It seems to speak directly to the post-Book of Mormon claim to have produced new revelation. This is totally anachronistic in relation to 1820, but highly plausible post-1830.

Summary and Conclusion of Discussion [SLIDE #13]

So, to sum up – and I’ll make this my concluding statement --I do not think that he *shrank* his 1832 account in response to rejection, but rather that he *expanded* his accounts in the context of recounting the FV during the thirties in the wake of publishing the Book of Mormon (a new revelation) and establishing a restored church in 1830. [CLICK] Here I think the Curtis account offers us a big retrieval clue when he says that JS was recounting the story of the first vision and the recovery of the golden plates in order to explain to believers “the reason why he preached the doctrine he did.” He preached the doctrines he did – a new revelation -- because all the churches had fallen away. If the churches hadn’t all apostatized, why bother with a new revelation? His 1832 version speaks to this issue, but the exegetical justification started to seem weak, so he replaced it with the “ask and receive” method so that the Lord revealed the apostasy directly. The Lord’s revelation of this to him, along with new elements that reflect his vision of the vision of Moses (the first prophet), shifts him from an evangelical seeking forgiveness in 1832, which he likely was in 1820, to a prophet being called in 1839.

SH: You’re assuming a progression from simple experience and explanation to more sophisticated. Isn’t it possible that his original experience and his original, unrecorded explanation were somewhere in the middle, something like his 1835 account? The way he remembered that account (spontaneous associative retrieval) is fundamentally different from the 1832 or 1839 accounts (strategic retrieval). [CLICK] In 1835 Smith remembered spontaneously in conversation and associated his vision with the events that resulted in the Book of Mormon. In 1832 and 1839 he sat down purposefully to compose autobiography.

If we can grant the possibility that memories are dynamic and don’t necessarily always progress from less to more, then it’s not a stretch to suppose that psychological reasons factored into his strategic retrieval when he purposefully composed autobiography. That act led him to tell the story differently—not just with ever increasing expansion (which accounts from the 1840s argue against)—but differently every time? If the 1839 diatribe reveals Smith’s psychological need to respond to rejection by the minister, then perhaps the 1832 account is best explained as Smith’s attempt, perhaps subconscious, to appease the minister who rejected him, speaking for the larger culture. That can explain his emphasis on biblical exegesis over new revelation *and* explain why he didn’t finish or share the account of his marvelous experience—it wasn’t as marvelous when

remembering to be accepted by the minister as it was when remembering why he revealed and preached what he did.

Our exchange has raised my consciousness of how my familiarity with the 1839 account may be opening my eyes to some things and blinding me to others. For example, in the light of the 1839 account, I have read Smith's 1832 critique of competitive pluralism as mild, no more condemning than similar critiques by a variety of seekers or primitivists, but you're telling me that churched folks might be a wee bit offended to learn "that they had apostatized from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament." What could clearly have been grounds for rejecting Smith's experience sounds so mild to me because of the comparatively combative 1839 denunciation of creeds and all versions of Christianity, if not all Christians. I realize now that's a poor gauge for how Smith's Christian neighbors, especially an invested clergyman, would respond to the announcement that they were apostate. Even so, I still think the 1832 can be read as a softened version of the original experience.

We agree that in his accounts, Smith becomes more prophetic over time, but I am explaining that in terms of what I regard as his reasons for recounting: (1) In 1832 a psychological need to reconcile with Evangelicalism, which was impossible because of the theological content of Smith's original experience, resulting in a written account that he didn't accept himself. (2) In 1835 a need to be more prophetic than Robert Matthias. (3) In 1839 the need to be head of a growing Church, heir to the great commission to take the good news to everyone, and a defiant psychological response to Evangelicalism instead of 1832's frustrated attempt at reconciliation. And if I'm right that Smith didn't like his 1832 account, its weak presentation of him as a prophet may be one reason why.

Reflections on Method and Process

Our exchange illuminates a variety of methodological issues [SLIDE #14]:

(1) The chart was easy to construct. [CLICK] We had no trouble teasing apart subjects' accounts of events and explanations (or more narrowly, experiences and appraisals) and to reach consensus on these descriptive analyses. The only real point of discussion in that regard was whether or not to include more of Smith's "diatribe" against the minister in the chart.

(2) [CLICK] We discovered how important it was to surface each other's assumptions, in our case assumptions about memory and our ability to reconstruct how a subject most likely viewed and/or would have recounted an event close to the time it occurred. Until we did this, we had difficulty following each other's arguments. We still have differences

with respect to the historical value of memory, which we will hold off on discussing for the sake of time. The key thing to note methodologically is that we were able to narrow and nuance those differences significantly by attending to the framing of narratives and specifically to the contextual factors that we thought might have cued, and thus shaped, what was recalled. And we are both convinced that studying various accounts of the same experience is an “excellent way to examine how interpretations of an experience develop over time.”¹⁷

(3) [CLICK] Once we had our assumptions on the table, having the chart as a point of reference allowed us to identify similarities and differences between the accounts. Although our initial reading of similarities and differences differed at times, we didn’t have much difficulty reaching an agreement based on the evidence in the chart. Referring to the chart allowed us to separate our analysis of similarities and differences between the accounts and our explanations of the similarities and differences.

(4) [CLICK] A relatively clear distinction between the evidence in the chart and our interpretations of the evidence allowed us to focus on articulating the reasons for our interpretations. This was an exciting part of the back and forth between us.

(5) Finally, it is probably obvious to everyone that our back and forth on the issue of memory and history has implications that are not simply academic. Steve’s explanatory reconstruction leaves room for an initial experience much more in keeping with the way the LDS tradition has viewed the FV. Ann’s explanatory reconstruction is much more minimalist and positions the canonized account in a developmental trajectory. While some might be tempted to view one explanation as more theological and the other as more historical, we would argue that both Steve’s sense that the initial event was robust and Ann’s sense that it was more minimal reflect faith-based predilections, whether LDS or naturalistic. Moreover, as historians, we both want our interpretations of the evidence to be judged based on agreed upon historical methods rather than our faith-based predilections. How one judges this evidence will then shape how we reconstruct the emergence of Mormonism as a new religious movement.

¹ The terminology and methods we are using here were developed for and are elaborated in Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Experience and Appraisal in the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (in preparation).

² AT: It might be more accurate to call it a “ReFraming Event,” since a “frame” in frame analysis is analogous to an appraisal and, thus, constitutive of the event. On frame analysis, see Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern Press, 1974); for discussion of frame analysis in relation to the emergence of social movements, see David A. Snow,

“Framing Processes, Ideology, and Discursive Fields,” in Snow, et al., *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (New York: Blackwell, 2007) and Hank Johnson, “Comparative Frame Analysis,” in Noakes and Johnson, *Frames of Protest: Social Movements and the Framing Perspective* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

³ AT: In terms of identity, I am drawing on work on social identity in social psychology. See Tom Postmes & Nyla R. Branscombe, *Rediscovering Social Identity: Key Readings* (New York: Psychology Press, 2010) and in relation to the emergence of new social formations, see S. Alexander Haslam, et al., “The Collective Origins of Valued Originality: A Social Identity Approach to Creativity,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 17/4 (2013), 384-301.

⁴ Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 2004), xv. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 35-41. In a 2009 interview, Richard Bushman said, speaking of Joseph Smith, “He initially thought, I believe, of the First Vision as a personal experience. It was his encounter with God that would reassure him of the favor of Heavenly Father. And only later did he come to see it as his call as a Prophet. The call of a prophet is a form of religious experience in Moses and Isaiah and all sorts of prophets. And gradually Joseph saw that this was the founding moment of his life as the restorer of the Gospel. But it took time for it to emerge in its full significance.” Samuel Alonzo Dodge, Interview of Richard L. Bushman, 2009, transcript in possession of Steven C. Harper.

⁵ In her 1945 biography of Joseph Smith, Fawn Brodie characterized his 1839 narrative as the “elaboration of some half-remembered dream stimulated by the early revival excitement and reinforced by the rich folklore of visions circulating in his neighborhood.” Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* 2d ed., rev & enl. (New York: Vintage, 1995), 24-25.

⁶ Smith’s accounts are evidence of what Richard Bushman called “the rearrangement of memory,” or of what might be quite accurately called, simply, *remembering*. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 69. Daniel L. Schacter and Elaine Scarry, *Memory, Brain, and Belief* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 19. In terms of memory studies, “the idea that there is a one-to-one correspondence between a bit of information stored away somewhere in our brain and the conscious experience of a memory that results from activating this bit of information is so intuitively compelling that it seems almost nonsensical to question it.” But memory scholars have questioned it and discovered that a memory is less a stored artifact than a present production. Most memories are based on past experience, to be sure, but such experience leaves traces or fragments in the brain that lie dormant until something in the present causes the creation of a memory. Such a memory is a combination of past remnants and present cues or reasons for re-remembering—it involves piecing together a past that makes sense in the present. Daniel Schacter, a leading psychologist of memory, wrote that “just as visual perception of the three-dimensional world depends on combining information from the two eyes, perception in time—remembering—depends on combining information from the present and the past.” Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 28, 71. “Merely to remember something is meaningless,” wrote scholar Roger Shattuck, “unless the remembered image is combined with a moment in the present affording a view of the same object or objects.” Roger Shattuck, *Proust’s Binoculars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 46-47.

⁷ David Middleton and Derek Edwards, eds., *Collective Remembering* (London: Sage, 1990), 3.

⁸ Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 71.

⁹ C.R. Barclay, for instance, observed that people he studied “retained the general meaning of their experiences, even though they were wrong about many particulars.” “Schematization of Autobiographical Memory,” in D.C. Rubin, ed., *Autobiographical Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 97.

¹⁰ Edmund Blair Bolles, *Remembering and Forgetting: An Inquiry into the Nature of Memory* (New York: Walker, 1988), 58, 64-65.

¹¹ E. Brooks Hollifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought From the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 335.

¹² According to the JSP notes on the 1832 version, “Christ’s declaration is saturated with scriptural allusions and phraseology from both the Bible and JS’s revelatory texts. See, for example, Leviticus 26:3; [Vision, 16 Feb. 1832](#), in Doctrine and Covenants 91:4, 1835 ed. [D&C 76:41]; [Revelation, ca. 7 Mar.](#)

1831, in Book of Commandments 48:9–10 [D&C 45:8]; [Revelation, 22 and 23 Sept. 1832](#), in Doctrine and Covenants 4:7, 1835 ed. [D&C 84:49]; Psalm 14:3; Isaiah 29:13; Deuteronomy 29:27; and Matthew 24:30.

¹³ AT: I think we can trace a shift in the kind of authority he is claiming over time. Initially, he claims the authority of a seer, which according to the Book of Mormon, is greater than that of a prophet. As of 1830, he starts to play down seer authority (it is repeatedly excised from the headings of his early visions), then shifts to priesthood and apostolic early in the 30s, and, over the course of the 30s, builds a case for prophetic authority as primary. The struggle with “dark powers” theme is inserted into his FV accounts as a way to make them more like Moses’s calling. But I think he knows this feeling from his 1823 efforts to recover the plates from the hill in the wake of his Moroni vision. All Smith’s accounts of this experience, which is included and reinterpreted in the 1832, 1835, and 1839 accounts, include this element of struggle, but it is progressively elaborated over time from what I take to be a struggle with doubt (1832) to a struggle with Satan (1839). Thus, as I argue in *Revelatory Events*, I think that the nub of the “struggle with dark powers” is revealed when, in response to his inability to recover the plates, he fears that his vision of the plates was “only” a dream, but then rejects this thought. In other words, I think the struggle with dark powers is a metaphoric way to express the struggle with doubt, i.e., the competing interpretation of reality offered by “Satan” or other demonic powers.

¹⁴ AT: There are also interesting parallels between the visions of Moses (and JS’s revisions of Genesis) with its expansive cosmology and frequent references to “the Only Begotten” and Joseph and Sydney’s vision of 16 Feb 1832 (D&C 76).

¹⁵ JS, History, Circa Summer 1832, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-summer-1832>.

¹⁶ Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft. “Literary Form and Historical Understanding: Joseph Smith’s First Vision.” *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 33–42.

¹⁷ Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 71.

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS	
Joseph Smith, jr, First Vision Accounts	
Diagonal = material only in 1832js Gray = material only in later versions	
Unintended experience event [what happened]	
1832js	"my mind become exceedingly [sic] distressed"
1835js	"being wrought up in my mind, respecting the subject of religion ... perplexed in mind"
1835c	Curtis: "he [JS] feeling anxiety to be religious his mind some what troubled"
1839js	Felt "desire" and implicit distress
Cause explanation [why it happened]	
1832js	"I [had] become convicted of my sins" in context of "contentions and divisions"
1835js	"looking at the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong"
1835c	Because "a revival of some of the sec[t]s was going on [and] some of his father[']s family joined in"
1839js	"I felt some desire to be united with [the Methodists]" but impossible to decide "who was right and who was wrong" ["desire" + inability to decide = implicit distress]. Context note: "In the midst of this war of words, and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself, what is to be done? Who of all these parties are right? Or are they all wrong together? and if any one of them be right which is it? And how shall I know it?"
Intended behavior event [what he did]	
1832jc	"Searched scriptures ... learned all had apostatized from true ... faith and there was no ... denomination"
Reason explanation [why he did it]	
1832jc	Implicitly, to find denomination where his sins could be forgiven

Unintended experience event [what happened]	
1835js	"under a realising sense that he had said (if the bible be true) ask and you shall receive knock and it shall be opened seek and you shall find and again, if any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men libarally and upbradeth not"
1835c	Curtis: "this scriptures came to his mind which sayes if a man lack wisdom let him ask of god who giveth liberaly and upbradeth not[.]"
1839js	"While ... laboring under ... [these] difficulties ... read [James 1:5] ...passage of scripture came ... with power [into his] heart ... enter[ed] with great force" [No cause given]
Intended behavior event [what he did]	
1839js	"reflected on it again and again"
Reason explanation [why he did it]	
1839js	"the teachers of religion of the different sects understood ... Scripture so differently as <to> destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible"
Intended behavior event [what he did]	
1839js	"I at last came to the determination to ask of God"
Reason explanation [why he did it]	
1839js	"I must either remain in darkness and confusion or else I must do as James directs, that is, Ask of God."
Intended behavior event [what he did]	
1832js	"I cried unto the Lord for mercy"
1835js	"I retired to the silent grove and bow[e]d down before the Lord ... and with a fixed determination to obtain it [information], I called upon the Lord for the first time"
1835c	Curtis: "believing it he went with a determinati[on] to obtain to enquire of the lord himself"
1839js	"retired [to the woods] ... kneeled down ... offer up the desires of my heart to God"
Reason explanation [why he did it]	

1832js	"For there was none else to whom I could go to obtain mercy"
1835js	"to obtain it [information]"
1835c	because he "believed it ["ask and you shall receive"]
1839js	Reasons for praying as above; reasons for kneeling in the woods not given.

Unintended experience event [what happened]	
1835js	"my tounge seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter, I heard a noise behind me like some person walking towrds me, I strove again to pray, but could not, the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer, I sprung up on my feet and looked around, but saw no person or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking"
1835c	Curtis: "after some strugle"
1839js	"<seized> upon by some power which entirely overcame me ... [the power bound] my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me and it seemed... as if I were doomed to sudden destruction ... I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction"
Cause explanation [why it happened]	
1835js	He could not find an ordinary explanation ("he saw no person or thing ...")
1839js	The feeling of being seized by a power was attributed to "this enemy." The cause was not imaginary. He was threatened "not [by] an imaginary ruin by to the power of some actual being from the unseen world who had a marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being"
Unintended experience event [what happened]	
1832js	"While in the attitude of prayer ... a pillar of light [brighter than the sun at noon] came down from above ... rested upon me and I was filled"
1835js	"I kneeled again my mouth was opened and my tounge liberated, and I called on the Lord in mighty prayer, a pillar of fire appeared above my head, it presently rested down up me head, and filled me with Joy unspeakable" ⁱ
1839js	"Just at this moment of great alarm I saw a pillar <of> light exactly over my head above the brightness of the sun, which descended ... upon me. ... I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound."
Cause explanation [why it happened]	
1832js	Image of pillar of fire/light associated with "shekinah" in OT; filling attributed to the "spirit of god"
1835js	No cause given for the "pillar of fire"; implicitly understood as response to prayer

1839js	No cause given for the light; implicitly understood as response to “great alarm”
Unintended experience event [what happened]	
1832js	“the Lord opened the heavens ... I saw the Lord ... he spake to me saying thy sins are forgiven thee” [the Lord’s speech continues in apocalyptic vein and ends with promise to “come quickly”]
1833a	Andrus: “angel came and that [glory?] and trees seemed to be consumed in blaze and he was there entrusted with this information that darkness covered the earth that the great mass of Christian world universally wrong their creeds all upon uncertain foundation now as young as you are I call upon you from this obscurity go forth and build up my kingdom on the earth”
1835js	“a personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame which was spread all around, and yet nothing consumed, another personage soon appeared like unto the first, he said unto me thy sins are forgiven thee, he testified unto me that Jesus Christ is the Son of God; <and I saw many angels in this vision”
1835c	Curtis: “the Lord manifested to him that the different sects were wrong also that the Lord had a great work for him to do.”
1839js	“... I saw two personages standing above me in the air. One of <them> spake unto me ... and said (pointing to the other) ‘This is my beloved Son, Hear him.’ ... No sooner ... did I get possession of myself so as to be able to speak, than I asked the personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right, (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong) and which I should join. I was answered that I just join none of them, for they were all wrong, and the Personage who addressed me said that all their Creeds were an abomination in his sight, that those professors were all corrupt, that “they draw near to me with their lips but their hearts are far from me, they ... [have] a form of Godliness but they deny the power thereof...” ⁱⁱ
Unintended experience event [what happened]	
1832js	“my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great joy and the Lord was with me”
1835js	No indication of what happened next.
1839js	“When I came to myself again I found myself lying on <my> back looking up into Heaven.”
Intended behavior event [what he did]	

1832js	"...but I could find none that would believe the hevnly [sic] vision nevertheless I pondered these things in my heart"
1839js	"Some few days later after I had this vision I happened to be in company with one of the Methodist Preachers who was very active in the before mentioned religious excitement and conversing with him on the subject of religion I took occasion to give him an account of the vision which I had had. I was greatly surprised at his behavior, he treated my communication not only lightly but with great contempt, saying it was all of the Devil, that there was no such thing as visions or revelations in these days, that all such things had ceased with the apostles and that there never would be any more of them."

1832js - JSP History, circa summer 1832

<http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-summer-1832>; accessed 26 Dec 2013.

1833a - Milo Andrus, 17 July 1853. Papers of George D. Watt MS 4534 box 2 disk 1 May 1853-July 1853 images 231-256. Sermon not in Journal of Discourses; partial transcript in CR 100 317 box 2 folder 15. Transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth 3 October 2012 corrected October 2013.

1835c - Joseph Curtis, History of Joseph Curtis, Curtis, October 2013. hurch History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

1835js - Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832 1: 183* vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian(S Press, 2008), 87), 877

1839js - JS, History, [ca. June 1839-ca. 1841]; handwriting of [James Mulholland](#) and [Robert B. Thompson](#); sixty-one pages; in JS History, 1838-1856, vol. A-1, CHL. <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2?dm=image-and-text&zm=zoom-inner&tm=expanded&p=3&s=undefined&sm=none>

ⁱ This quotation could be broken down further, but is left intact since the themes align with other material in the box.

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